
Storytelling in the second language classroom

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The power of storytelling is universal. Throughout history, and throughout the world, communities have gathered together their stories as a way of making meaning from their experiences and of making connections between themselves. This paper examines the role stories play in helping us to identify ourselves as cultural beings, and it describes how this identity relates to those learning an additional language in a new setting. With reference to 20 young students in an Introductory English Centre, the paper documents the classroom activities that surround eight storytelling sessions. The ways in which these activities contribute towards the children's cognitive, emotional, and linguistic development are examined and the paper concludes with an affirmation of the value of storytelling as a vehicle for second language development.

Keywords: *culture; ESL; linguistic development; narratives*

Conceptual framework

As a vehicle for experience, stories provide the individual with the opportunity to make sense of reality and to make sense of other worlds. Young children bring order and meaning to their experiences by narrating them to themselves and to those around them. Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986) identifies two modes of cognitive functioning, one the logico-scientific system of description and explanation regulated by requirements of consistency and non-contradiction, and the other the narrative mode, dealing with “human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (p.13). So while we may learn about the physical world through logical rules and abstract principles, we learn about the human condition through narratives – a consciousness of what those involved in the action know, think, or feel.

Culture embodies the knowledge and behaviours which a particular group shares and passes on to the next generation. Within the language of a culture, narratives play a central role.

Prehistoric cave dwellers used paintings to communicate their stories; oral cultures rely on the telling of tales to preserve their heritage of significant narrative. In the West, our canon of stories draws on biblical references, mythology, geography and history and, more recently, on Hollywood movies and television dramas. And whenever people come together socially, stories are exchanged in the form of anecdotes, gossip, or personal narratives. Family jokes and stories create a shared interpretation of events which confirm and strengthen membership of an intimate microculture. Wajnryb (2003) recognises the cultural significance of the narrative:

Over time, a nexus is forged between the experience and its representation . . . and we become accustomed to doing things, and expecting things to be done, in certain words and certain ways. These representations, or genres, become an accepted part of our social identity. (p. 11)

The story is thus part of a set of literacy practices that operate within a culture as a means of establishing understandings and identity. Young children are helped to come to terms with the world “out there” by absorbing the stories which have surrounded them from birth. And once children start school they encounter yet more stories as they engage in the more formal literacy practices of the classroom. Cairney (1995) describes how learners explore and exploit literacy as a “form of social mediation . . . [in order to] construct symbolic meanings and to engage with others” (p. 43).

The shift from viewing literacy as a discrete cognitive skill to understanding it as a set of complex social practices has developed over the last thirty years. A significant influence within this paradigm has been the work of the psychologist Vygotsky (1978). He believed that higher order psychological processes such as literacy could only be acquired through interaction with others, after which the individual would internalise them and eventually become proficient at an independent level. He identified a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as the distance of the cognitive gap between what a child can do unaided and what they can do with help. The activity provides the potential for learning, as the zone is constructed through the talk that occurs between student and teacher during participation in a given task. The concept of scaffolding describes the support which learners receive from more capable others. Wells (1979) recognised the support given by parents in the early years of language development and, in

particular, identified the importance of sharing stories. He documents how parents and carers scaffold their children's attempts to narrate their experiences by helping them to select and order the elements to be brought together. They also help them to extend the recount with questioning prompts and the rephrasing of utterances. And sharing, clarifying, and delighting in stories and storybooks enable children to "discover, albeit unconsciously, the enormously facilitating power that language has as a symbolic mode of representation" (Wells, 1986, p. 196).

For second language learners living in a new country, familiarity with the narratives of their home culture is clearly significant for their cognitive and emotional growth. Furthermore, familiarity with the narratives of the target culture is also highly desirable. Students need to recognise the linguistic features of the narratives in everyday currency: the jokes and anecdotes, as well as the popular and traditional stories, which are the source of so many cultural references within society.

Stories also have the potential to serve as vehicles for second language development. Krashen's (1982) theory of language acquisition, based on theories from psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics, has informed much second language teaching in Australian classrooms. Krashen recognised that development of competence in a new language occurs through understanding and meaningful communication. Understanding is central to second language learning: "In order for acquirers to progress to the next stage . . . they need to understand input language that includes a structure that is part of the next stage" (p. 180). "Input" here refers to the samples of language to which a learner is exposed; thus "comprehensible input" is meaningful stretches of language which the learner is able to understand. Krashen's Input Hypothesis states that acquisition takes place when a learner understands input that is slightly beyond their current level of comprehension, also known as $i + 1$ (input plus one). Input can be modified in order to facilitate second language comprehension: "foreigner talk" is a simplified form of communication characterised by a slower rate of speech and frequent repetition and restating. According to Krashen, students do not have to produce language in order to acquire it.

The role of the emotions in the process of language acquisition is explained as part of the Affective Filter Hypothesis. The learner's emotional state is seen as an adjustable filter that freely passes, impedes, or blocks comprehensible input. Three kinds of variables are related to a low affective filter – that is, one

which leads to successful language acquisition. These are motivation, self confidence, and levels of anxiety. Learners with high motivation, a good self image, and low levels of personal and classroom anxiety are more likely to become proficient language users.

On the surface, Krashen's description of $i + 1$ seems to have many things in common with Vygotsky's ZPD, in that learning occurs just ahead of development. However, there are key differences: most notably, that the ZPD is created through interaction with more knowledgeable others. Indeed, from a sociocultural perspective, ZPD cannot be attributed solely to an individual, but to the dynamics of the interaction surrounding the task. Long (1983) recognises the need for interaction in achieving comprehensible input. He suggests that we modify the interactional structure of conversation "through such devices as self- and other- repetition, confirmation and comprehension checks and clarification requests" (p. 212). Interactional modifications between native speaker and non-native speaker are, he says, far more common than modification of input. Similarly, Gee expands on Krashen's theory by adding a social component; namely, that "acquisition is a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching" (cited in Freeman & Freeman, 2001, p. 92). Thus the development of communicative competence comes through interaction with proficient language users who can extend and develop a learner's output.

The perspective presented by language acquisition theories has clear implications for the second language classroom. The input provided to learners must be made comprehensible and meaningful. Students need the opportunity to develop their skills in a relaxed working environment where social interaction and collaboration are encouraged and risk taking is welcomed. The role of storytelling in this context has been well documented (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Wajnryb, 2003; Miller, 2004). Garvie (1990) also recognises the value of story methodology within ESL and EFL teaching, suggesting that "the learner is challenged to solve problems within the context of the tale [and] at the same time to develop a knowledge of English structure" (p. 27). Stories give experience of other people's lives, ideas, and cultures and allow students to imagine new worlds and new possibilities. Wolf and Heath (1992) describe the deep learning associated with storytelling: "A young child listens to a story and for days and years after, meanings come wherever the child's life experience converges

with multiple texts – worlds in dialogue” (p. 133). Stories can be revisited many times and the process of reshaping, reusing, and retelling a story is particularly well suited to students whose linguistic responses are also being reshaped as they develop fluency in a new language. Miller (2004), in her study of second language learners’ journal writing, concludes that narratives present enriched opportunities for engagement in the secondary ESL classroom, as they encourage “meaning focused interaction between teachers and students” and provide a forum where the learner can “exercise agency and control within the learning context” (p. 22).

This study sets out to determine the nature of the support that storytelling might offer to the young second language learner in the primary ESL classroom.

Methodology

The research question, “How does the use of stories in the language classroom benefit young ESL learners?”, is explored by adopting the case study approach and the results are essentially qualitative and illuminative rather than conclusive. The focus group comprises approximately 20 young children aged between 5 and 11 years in a New Arrivals Program. They attend a Primary Introductory English Centre (PIEC) – a government school within the Australian Capital Territory for students who have recently arrived in Australia and who receive specialist teaching in English as a Second Language before enrolling in a mainstream school. The students belong to various cultural groups and represent a range of different language users. Due to their age, some are pre-literate in their own language as well as English; others have had a few years of formal education in their home country. Many of the children are in Australia for a limited time while their parents are employed in a government or armed forces posting in Canberra; others are here on a permanent basis as refugees. They are a diverse group in many ways.

The time span of the project covers a period of approximately twelve weeks, covering eight story telling sessions with associated activities based on eight different tales (listed in the references). The stories were told within the classroom during the daily Literacy Block in order to maintain a familiar learning environment. The students worked within two home groups with around twelve in each group and the class teacher was always in the classroom and sometimes contributed to the discussions. The eight stories represent a range of narrative style and content designed

to introduce the students to different plot lines, character development, and language use. Each story was told or read (or both) in English.

The data generated in this project is naturalistic, obtained through classroom observations and from work samples collected during the lessons in the form of written and drawn responses to the stories. I received parental permission to reproduce these work samples and pseudonyms replace students' real names throughout this paper. Field notes were used to record observations, feelings, and descriptions of these sessions, supplemented by transcripts of interactions between teacher and student, and between students. My role as researcher was as a participant observer investigating a working classroom and as such this is in part an ethnographic study, a study of lived experience.

The analysis of data is critical for the integrity of the project. The ethnographic analysis of classroom observations is important for the identification of the literacy practices and linguistic interactions that characterise the second language learning environment. Such data help to create an understanding of the context in which the children operate and develop insights into the overall narrative of their learning journeys. I have engaged in the "coding" of the significant events and episodes that demonstrate learning opportunities for the students:

Coding is the process of searching through the data by means of asking who, what, when . . . how . . . what is going on here. This code is then used to organise the data beneath category headings through a process of comparison and searches for possible relationships between pieces of data. (Knobel & Lankshear, 1999, pp. 93-94)

In selecting the category headings beneath which to organise my data, I drew on a body of research on storytelling and second language learning as outlined above, and distilled six focus areas from the Conceptual Framework. They are:

1. The development of relationships between events, objects, and actions (cognitive growth)
2. An understanding of how other people "think, feel, and do" (empathic intelligence)
3. Turning experience into narrative: "finding a voice"
4. Second language development: student output
5. Second language development: connecting with texts
6. A productive learning environment: the low affective filter

All significant events and episodes will thus be categorised according to their contribution to the students' learning. The six focus areas represent different, but overlapping, perspectives on the learning process.

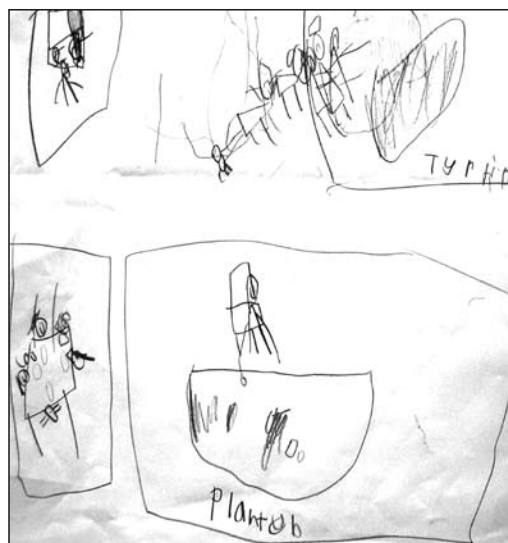
Results

Cognitive growth

The children in this class are learning in English as well as about English, and, for some, the PIEC is their first experience of formal schooling. I wanted to find out whether these stories could help students develop understandings of the relationship between events, objects, and actions within a new culture, thus providing a useful vehicle for cognitive growth.

The Enormous Turnip provides opportunities to learn about growth and change, as well as creative methods of problem solving. The story, written originally for a Russian audience, features a root vegetable unfamiliar to most of the children. I showed the turnip to the children, who all held it, smelled it, and weighed it in their hands. One boy, reluctant to let it go, held on to it lovingly throughout the story and then tried unsuccessfully to draw around it as part of his post-story response. He kept the turnip on his desk as he organised his page into four episodes: the planting, the pulling out, the cooking, and the eating (Figure 1). As a pre-literate Kindergarten student, his response was mediated by pictures rather than words, but there is a clear understanding of sequencing evident in his work.

Figure 1.



All early childhood educators need to extend and develop children's conceptual learning. Experiences around, for example, height, mass, and temperature have to be combined in the second language classroom with explicit teaching of new English terminology. *Lima's Red Hot Chilli* gives the children an opportunity to discuss the properties of different foods and to consider how useful they were as an after school snack. In conversation, some students and I were looking at a real coconut and relating it to the story we had heard earlier. Through discussion – and much banging of knuckles on the coconut to reinforce the quality of hardness – the students were able to develop new conceptual understandings.

The next page showed Lima unable to reach the plate of cakes on the top shelf of the cupboard.

- Teacher What about this (to student) . . . you drew a picture of this, didn't you? Did she eat these cakes?
- Student Too high.
- Teacher Yes, they were too high up for her to reach.

Figure 2.



This picture (Figure 2) demonstrates her understanding of “too high” despite her inability to use the correct written English. As the teacher recasts the utterance into a full sentence and she practises its usage in informal play, her understanding of the consequences of “too high” is developed.

Empathic intelligence

The second language classroom must also provide opportunities for students to explore the complexity of emotional responses, to understand the effects of human activity on their world and to develop an awareness of what Bruner (1986) terms the “landscape of consciousness” – where those involved in the action “know, think or feel” (p. 14).

The Enormous Turnip is not only about change and growth, it also covers a whole range of emotions from anticipation to frustration to satisfaction. So as I told and acted out this story, I adopted much body language to indicate the feelings of the old man whose appetite was growing along with his frustration. And as I “pulled” at the turnip, several children started to make similar pulling motions where they sat, their faces set with determination. The pleasure when I finally freed the turnip was met with sighs of relief and there was much wiping away of sweat. Alongside the learning of new vocabulary (reinforced by repetition), there may have developed some awareness of how it might feel to be frustrated but not to give up – a valuable insight for newcomers to a different language.

The effects of the chilli on Lima’s mouth (*Lima’s Red Hot Chilli*) would be known to many of the Asian students for whom chilli is a common ingredient in everyday meals. The story is set in the kitchen of the family home and the support offered to Lima by each of the extended family group might also be familiar. It may be very reassuring for young learners to know that mothers demonstrate the same loving care for their children even though they speak in English.

The story *Love You Teddy* also has a domestic setting, this time a Western, white, nuclear family. The themes of jealousy, neglect, loss, and love emerge through the characters of the toys and their interactions with Amelia, the little girl. The teacher/storyteller invited emotional involvement and empathy right from the start of the session and the tension was built up by the interplay of the text, the graphic illustrations and the storyteller who invested the reading with explicit displays of emotion. At the end of the story,

there was an interaction between student and teacher which served as a coda, or moral conclusion.

For these young students, situations will arise where the new (for example school or friends) is more appealing than the known (family or traditions). Discussions such as this one may provide assurance that loyalty to old friends or traditions need not exclude embracing the new, something which may appeal to students experiencing a clash of demands between Australian and home cultures.

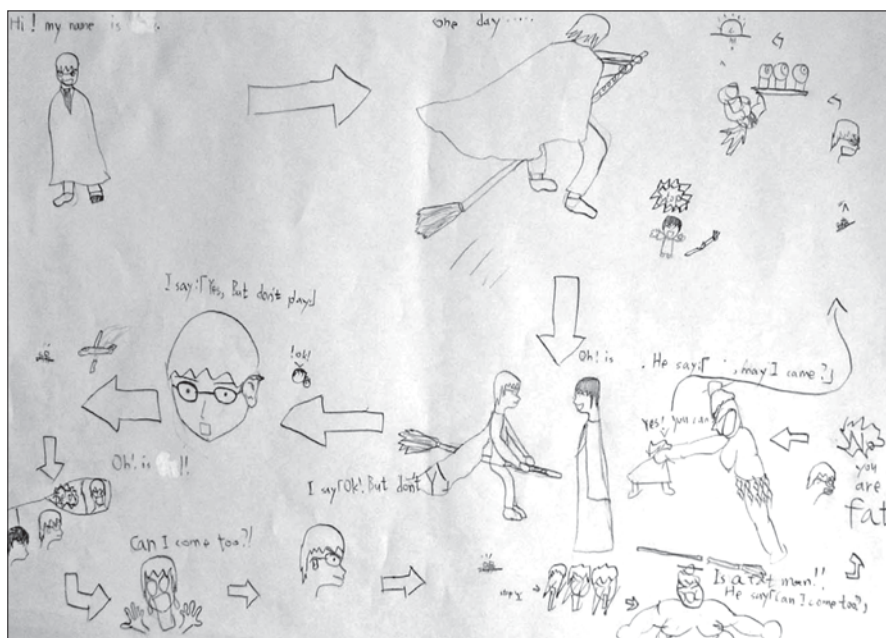
Finding a voice

Stories can help us to express significant events and emotions in our lives, and to find a voice. Young second language learners need to be able to make sense of their experiences and to translate them into a coherent and comprehensible form. Through storytelling and associated activities, they can be scaffolded to achieve this goal.

Students can develop agency in their own stories through the transformation of another. After the lively discussion and dramatic play following the reading of *Mr Gumpy's Outing*, the children were introduced to the linguistic structures surrounding making a request: "May I?" and "Can I?" and the compromise embedded in the response: "Yes, if you . . ." or "Yes, but don't . . ." They were invited to transform the narrative to fit their own experience; they took on Mr Gumpy's role and could choose their companions on the outing. Thus they took control of the narrative (characters, setting, resolution) and also of the imaginary outing itself, as their chosen companions deferred to their authority. Figure 3 shows Lee's story of an outing by broomstick. The story map outlines the course of the journey as he encounters various classmates and shows a more sophisticated – and humorous – grasp of social relationships and compromise than one would expect from Lee, a relative newcomer to the group and still quite reluctant to speak in English. The transformation of this simple, repetitive storyline allowed him to develop, on paper at least, some control over his social environment.

These young learners are encouraged to express their personal feelings and emotions in the target language. The activity is carefully scaffolded: the storytelling session modelled for them an appropriate narrative style; the ensuing discussion developed appropriate concepts and presented them within appropriate linguistic structures. Thus they are provided with the

Figure 3.



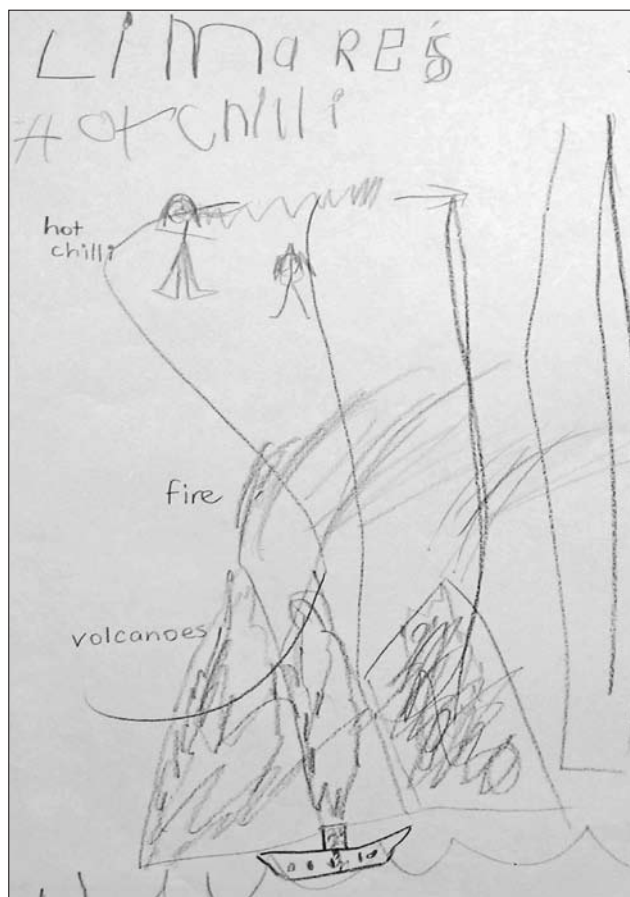
necessary support to accomplish what they could not manage alone: in a Vygotskian sense they are operating towards the outer limits of their ZPD.

Conditions for second language development

An effective second language classroom is one which creates productive contexts for language learning. The storytelling sessions revolved around many forms of the spoken language. From the pre-story talk, telling and reading aloud, and the post-story discussions and conversations, there was a large amount of input to which the learners were exposed. The planned scaffolding, such as mime and gestures and the use of realia and visual aids, helped to transform the narratives into Krashen's "comprehensible input".

Some of the students' responses were made before they engaged in any interaction with teacher or peers. Nam's picture (Figure 4) indicates the level of his receptive language. He depicts volcanoes erupting fire, as well as a figure with fire coming out of her mouth, both of which suggest an understanding of concepts relating to *Lima's Red Hot Chili*. While he was able to dictate "hot chilli" and "fire," he did not have the vocabulary for "volcano" –

Figure 4.



this was provided by the teacher after a conversation about mountains exploding with fire. Certainly Nam had listened to the input and was able produce the utterance “hot chilli” but the vocabulary surrounding volcanic activity was supplied by the teacher. In this case, the interaction – and the scaffolding that occurred within it – provided Nam with an opportunity to increase his linguistic resources and his understanding of volcanoes.

The next sample represents a written response to *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*.

One day there was a three goats. The little goat want to eat the green grass to the other side. The little goat is going first. Some troll is under the bridge and the up and the troll said I will eat you up said the troll. Don't eat me I'm too little for you wait for my big brother. OK said the troll.

This student has sequenced events successfully into the narrative genre. The opening “One day” is an appropriate start to the story and he accurately recorded the discourse between goat and troll. The errors are common to second language learners: subject-verb agreement (e.g., “there was a three goats”) and an inconsistency of tense (e.g., “some troll is under the bridge”). Although he had clearly heard the correct model in the story, the errors are still part of his interlanguage, or learner language. Without an opportunity to attend to these errors in the context of a teacher-student interaction it may take longer for the correct forms to be adopted. Ellis (1988) states that there “is evidence to suggest that the types of interactions learners participate in facilitate development by influencing the rate of progress” (p. 95).

This next conversation develops the notion of contingency. It took place after the telling of *Dear Zoo* and was between the teacher (T) and a student (S); it was part of a whole class discussion on caring for pets.

- 1 S Fish make good pets.
- 2 T Yes, but don't you have to clean the water every single week?
- 3 S No because my mum . . . in Taiwan get er fish some clean water fish.
- 4 T And what do they do?
- 5 S Some black fish . . . they suck (unclear)
- 6 T Like snails? They suck off the slime like snails?
- 7 S (nods)
- 8 S2 Yes, it's black it stick, it's hard, we saw them at Belconnen Markets!

This exchange is more productive than the more common IRF exchange where Initiation (or question, elicitation) is followed by Response (or answer) and then Feedback (or follow up, evaluation). It is an interaction common in many classrooms. The IRF limits the amount of language the student can produce (one utterance to the teacher's two) and also elicits answers which the teacher already knows, thus reducing the conversation to a type of guessing game. van Lier (1996) suggests that for interaction to be productive it must go beyond the IRF. He identifies four characteristics of a more effective discourse: first, conversational talk, where speakership alternates and the sequence and outcome are unpredictable; second, symmetrical rights and

duties of speaking, with no power hierarchy; third, exploratory talk, where the teacher is authoritative rather than authoritarian; and last, contingent discourse, relating new material to known and setting up expectations for what comes next.

I suggest this kind of interaction characterises the kind of negotiation of meaning which occurs in the *Dear Zoo* conversation above. Analysis indicates a “loosening” of the IRF and thus an extension of the discourse. After the student initiates the conversation (line 1), speakership then alternates symmetrically with no exercise of power by the teacher. Rather, the pair engage in an exploratory discussion (lines 4 and 5) about the fish which is extended by the teacher in line 6 as she links “snails” and “slime” into the original context. The interaction concludes with another student relating the new to the familiar (line 8).

Such effective interaction may be the result of the intersubjectivity implicit in storytelling. The participants are jointly focused on the activity and its goals, and therefore draw each other’s attention towards a common direction.

Connecting with texts

Young second language learners in a new country need to make connections with the narratives of their own culture in order to maintain their cultural identity. They also need to become familiar with the style of narratives from the target language. Western narratives are connected through a structure which usually features firstly orientation, then complication, and finally a resolution of events. The eight storytelling sessions all provided the students with clear models of the Western genre; for example, the turnip was planted in the garden (orientation), proved difficult to pull up (complication), but was finally dislodged and cooked for supper (resolution). The sequence in the children’s retellings (oral, drawn, or written) indicated their understanding of this structure.

There were many links between the children’s responses and other Western narratives. While constructing a story map for *The Magic Egg* with three of the girls, I asked them to draw their home with a garden around it. Their representations of houses all conform to the classic conventional style (a box with a triangle on top of it), despite one of the girls having lived in an African village prior to coming to Canberra. Careful inspection of the garden reveals a turnip growing amongst the flowers, not enormous but big enough to be noticed. We had shared *The Enormous Turnip*

story a few weeks before this activity; the presence of the vegetable in the picture seems to indicate that Tolstoy's turnip can also flourish in an Australian context.

As *The Magic Egg* story developed, the three girls were invited to write their own story endings. The youngest described her imaginary world in pictures and asked me to write the captions for them. I did so, putting the writing next to the drawings. When we finished, she looked at the page and shook her head. "It's not a story!", she said, "Write it like that one." She pointed to another student's writing, set out in the conventional continuous prose of a narrative. I did so, to her satisfaction. "Now it looks like a story," she said, and took it off to show her teacher. Her sense of the format of the Western narrative genre was developing.

The affective filter in stories

Krashen (1982) identifies the affective filter as an imaginary barrier which prevents learners from acquiring language from the available input. "Affect" refers to the motives, needs, attitudes, and emotional states of the learner: anxiety or boredom, for example, will raise the filter, thus blocking effective learning. Conversely it will be "down" when the learner is relaxed and engaged. I looked for evidence which might connect storytelling with a low affective filter.

There are many instances of laughter punctuating the group sessions. Transcription of the recording of *Dear Zoo* was hampered by the noise made by one student who laughed incessantly throughout the entire telling. He understood the humour involved as each zoo animal was taken from the box and he responded with glee to the storyteller's antics. His reaction created an atmosphere of fun in the classroom which was highly appealing. Quieter students divided their attention between the storytelling and his laughter, smiling as they did so. His pleasure was infectious, as was his engagement with the learning, and it all contributed to a positive classroom climate.

During the discussion before *Mr Gumpy's Outing* there was a similar reaction as we all imitated animal noises and unruly behaviour. Perhaps it was to do with the fact that we were all laughing together which made the activity so productive: both teacher and students had equal parts to play in providing the humour and in responding to it. As Dufficy (2005) notes, teachers and learners "have co-constructed ways of doing and thinking that allow for a greater symmetry of contribution" (p. 76).

It may also have been to do with the subject material: animal stories were without doubt the most popular with these children. There is perhaps a universal appeal about animals: children seem to recognise and identify with many such storybook characters. Alison Lurie (2003), in her study of children's literature, recognises that "a large proportion of the stories are about animals. This is especially true of books for small children" (p. xiii). She suggests that animals make the story universal because the "gender and race are concealed, [therefore] any reader or listener can identify with it" (p. 174). Perhaps this would explain the appeal of animal stories with this group of second language learners, and their contribution to reducing the affective filter.

Conclusion

A significant finding from this study relates to the many opportunities for meaningful interaction created by the storytelling sessions. The importance of interaction has already been identified in this paper: it is integral to Vygotsky's theory of human development and is also significant in the development of second language skills. The students were operating within zones which promoted meaningful talk, allowing for learning around a number of concepts; for example, growth and change in *The Enormous Turnip* and love and loss in *Love You Teddy*. There was also evidence of carefully scaffolded input designed to facilitate language acquisition, for example, the questioning techniques following *Mr Gumpy's Outing*. The students' enjoyment of the stories and their engagement with the activities indicated a low affective filter that facilitated their language acquisition and their learning.

The negotiation of meaning involved in a productive interaction not only promotes resources for thinking but also assists the language learner. van Lier (2000) suggests that the learner is immersed in an environment full of potential meanings and that these meanings become available as the learner acts and interacts within and with this environment. He describes the opportunity for learning as an "affordance [or] a particular property of the environment that is relevant – for good or for ill – to an active, perceiving organism in that environment" (p. 252). The terminology can usefully be applied to the context of language learning: "if the language learner is active and engaged, she will perceive linguistic affordances and use them for linguistic action" (p. 252). Significance is thus attached not to the linguistic input, but to the active learner or to the activity itself. It may be that

storytelling, in a productive and supportive classroom, is valuable because it provides the learners with a variety of accessible and relevant linguistic affordances. Certainly the results confirmed much engagement and evidence of “linguistic action” amongst the students.

This case study has validated my initial interest in the subject and has confirmed the value of story as a vehicle for second language development. It is an attempt to move such commonplace practice out of the intuitive realm and to provide some empirical evidence to support its inclusion in the daily program.

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